



Contact: Shelley Dawicki
508-495-2378
Shelley.dawicki@noaa.gov

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Group Effort Leads to Successful Turtle Disentanglements June 19 off Woods Hole

Woods Hole Laboratory staff from NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) helped disentangle two leatherback turtles on Sunday, June 19, just hours apart. One turtle was spotted near Quick's Hole, the other off Naushon Island, both in the Elizabeth Island chain off Woods Hole.

NOAA Fisheries oversees the nation's stranding response network for all marine mammals and sea turtles. In the Northeast, a number of non-profit groups work with NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Coast Guard to share their expertise and skills in stranding responses and disentanglements. On Cape Cod and the Islands, entangled turtles are commonly sighted during the summer months and are reported to the Coast Guard or to the designated stranding network lead group, in this case the Center for Coastal Studies (CCS) in Provincetown.

CCS is located nearly 70 miles from Woods Hole. The NEFSC's Woods Hole Lab has an active sea turtle research program, and several people who specialize in studying and handling sea turtles. CCS contacted Heather Haas and Eric Matzen of the NEFSC's Protected Species Branch for help.

A boater called in the entangled leatherback turtle near Quick's Hole in the Elizabeth Island chain and stood by until the Coast Guard boat, a 45-foot response boat-medium (RBM), with NEFSC's Haas and Matzen aboard arrived on site. Matzen and Coast Guard personnel disentangled the animal following CCS protocols and set it free.

To learn more about entanglements, Matzen put a camera underwater to film the process. "The Coast Guard crew were very skilled and worked together to maneuver the boat precisely in the fast current," Matzen said.

Just a few hours later, a second leatherback turtle was spotted by recreational boaters entangled near Naushon. This time, Matzen and Lieutenant Matthew Bass from the Massachusetts Environmental Police responded and freed that turtle.

Earlier this season there was a leatherback entangled off the Knob in Woods Hole and beach goers waded in to help the turtle. While everyone was delighted the turtle was disentangled, it is safer for humans and turtles if they wait for trained responders to arrive. Taking advantage of

the event, NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) in Gloucester, which takes the lead on response coordination, and the NEFSC in Woods Hole worked with other local groups to get that message out to the public.

"We have helped free a number of entangled turtles in recent years near Woods Hole," said Henry Milliken, who leads the NEFSC's conservation engineering effort at the Woods Hole Laboratory. The group works to adapt fishing gear in ways that reduce marine animal entanglements in nets, dredges and other fishing gear. Like Matzen and Haas, Milliken is on the local response team.

"These successful disentanglements show the power of collaboration among local organizations, and the need to inform the public and boaters that the best way to help is to call the stranding network and stand by on site until trained personnel arrive to deal with the situation," said Heather Haas, a NEFSC turtle researcher also at the Woods Hole Laboratory. "The folks that called in the entanglement and stood by waiting are real heroes. They probably saved that turtle's life and allowed us to collect useful information that may help other turtles."

"The disentanglement response effort for both leatherbacks was directed by CCS, and it was rewarding to be able to help on this end," said Matzen. "It takes a number of organizations working together to have a successful outcome, and this time we did, twice in one day."

All involved urge the public to stand by and report an entangled turtle or marine mammal. Keep it in sight and reduce any stress on the animal as much as possible until trained responders arrive. Sea turtles are very strong, and some like leatherbacks are quite large. A stressed animal can be unpredictable, so keep pets and people at a safe distance.

"From a science center perspective, we are happy to help with these disentanglement efforts, not only to save individual animals but also so that we can learn more about entanglements, with the long term goal of mitigating future interactions," said Haas.

If you see entangled sea turtles or marine mammals in Massachusetts, boaters can use USCG Channel 16 or call the Disentanglement Hotline at 1-800-900-3622 at the Center for Coastal Studies. CCS handles disentanglements for large whales and sea turtles and will contact local partners around the Cape and Islands as circumstances dictate.

A NOAA Fisheries turtle stranding and disentanglement members web site lists the local organizations, contacts and response care and animals rescued. To report a stranding or entanglement, contact your closest stranding network partner or call the NOAA Fisheries hotline for the region from Maine to Virginia at 1-866-755-6622.

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Related links:

Leatherback Turtles: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/turtles/leatherback.html>

Sea Turtle Ecology and Population Dynamics Research at NEFSC:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/turtles/index.html>

Sea Turtle Disentanglement Network:

<http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected/stranding/disentanglements/turtle/stdn.html>

Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding and Disentanglement Program:

<http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected/stranding/>

NOAA Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network:

<http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected/stranding/disentanglements/turtle/stssn.html>

Sea Turtle Week 2016: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/stories/2016/06/seaturtle-week-2016.html>